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The Cultural Relevance of Developmentally Appropriate Practice:

Possibilities and contradictions from around the world

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The Cultural Relevance of Developmentally Appropriate Practice: Possibilities and contradictions from around the world

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The Cultural Relevance of Developmentally Appropriate Practice: Possibilities and contradictions from around the world

by

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In 2009 the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) released their most recent position statement on developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) for preschool aged children. This foundational document provides a framework widely used within the United States for what is considered developmentally appropriate and inappropriate when applied to educating young children. By utilizing a comparative early childhood educational lens this paper examines preschool education practices around the world in order to support, inform, broaden, or challenge these supposedly developmentally appropriate guidelines.

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INTRODUCTION

In the United States the field of early childhood education is not governed or regulated by any one federal agency or legislative body. Because of this lack of cohesion there is much debate regarding the role of early childhood education as either an academic stepping stone to kindergarten or a distinctive time for play and active learning. The non-profit National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has emerged as a leading voice in the play and active learning field for what is considered appropriate practice for preschool aged children. Since its first adoption of a framework in 1986 NAEYC has released three separate position statements on what it considers developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) for children from birth through age 8. The most recent manifestation of this position statement was released in 2009 in order to address critical issues in the current context of early childhood education. These guidelines are widely influential and espoused by many in the early childhood arena in the United States.

Because of its widespread use NAEYC's definition of DAP is seen by many practitioners and educators as the 'best' way to educate preschool children, with many in early childhood education referring to the DAP handbook as 'the Bible' as an indication of how strongly they feel the need for such a directive and the degree to which many believe in the truth and power of its contents (Mallory & New, 1994). However, when looking at these guidelines using a comparative early childhood education lens it becomes apparent that the notion of one 'best' way to educate children differs among countries, cultures, and people groups. Information abounds on the education of preschoolers around the world and rarely do these examples show a mirror image of DAP in the United States. By looking at these educative practices around the world

and using a comparative early childhood education viewpoint this paper therefore raises the question of how preschool education practices in other countries and cultures support, inform, broaden, or challenge the most recent NAEYC DAP guidelines.

NAEYC GUIDELINES

NAEYC as an organization was founded in 1926 but it is only within the past few decades that its importance in the field of early childhood education in the United States has come to the forefront. With a membership of over 90,000 individuals located in 300 affiliate networks NAEYC bills itself as "the world's largest organization working on behalf of young children." (About NAEYC, n.d.) Its three different position statements on DAP have formed the foundation for their certification program of national preschools. Although optional and not accredited by the federal government a NAEYC accreditation status is seen by many as the high-water mark for excellent preschools in the United States.

Developmentally appropriate practices according to NAEYC were first defined in 1986. Over the years these practices (and their counterpart, developmentally inappropriate practices-DIP) have been revised in order to reflect current practices and a changing cultural context. Based on the most recent rendering of this position statement developmentally appropriate practices are defined as grounded both in the research on child development and learning and in the knowledge base regarding educational effectiveness in order to promote young children's optimal learning and development (Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8, 2009).

The application of DAP in the early childhood classroom includes many different features. All DAP practices fall under one of the following three categories: knowledge must inform decision-making, goals must be challenging and achievable, and teaching must be intentional to be effective (Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8, 2009). A teacher who follows DAP is considered to be 'excellent' when their decisions are informed first by what the early childhood field knows

about how best to promote children's development and learning (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Well-known terms such as 'individualized learning', 'creating a community of learners', and 'learning through play' are found throughout NAEYC's position statement and are easily recognized as 'DAP' by those in the early childhood field (Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8, 2009). These developmentally appropriate practices are seen to benefit preschool children in various ways including the building of trusting relationships, the physical benefits of play, and preparation for later academic success (Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8, 2009).

NAEYC's guidelines on DAP are a well-recognized part of the early childhood education landscape in the United States. This landscape includes multiple viewpoints on developmentally appropriate practices, including a push for greater academic work for preschool aged children. Their influence for play through learning at developmental stages reaches across our countries borders, and with this widening scope comes the ability to compare NAEYC's developmentally appropriate practices with the ideal practices of other cultures around the world. The framework of comparative early childhood education is therefore a vital tool to use in expressing how practices in other countries and cultures support, inform, challenge, or broaden DAP as described in NAEYC's 2009 position statement.

Comparative early childhood education as a discipline supports the notion that there are different ways of 'doing' the education of young children. Those in this field look at the theme of how the practices of teaching and learning relate to the context of culture, structure, and policy in which these practices are embedded (Alexander, 2000). Alexander, who has written multiple works concerning pedagogy as a cultural practice, continues to elaborate: "No educational policy or observation can be understood except by reference to culture...culture and language are central and pervasive" (Alexander, 2000). This focus on the cultural nature of development values the surrounding influences and forces in a child's life to a much higher degree than the Piagetian linear stages of development that form the foundation for NAEYC's DAP. Barbara Rogoff defines development as a process of people's changing participation in sociocultural activities of their communities (Rogoff, 2003). Rogoff continues:

> "This perspective stresses that understanding human development requires detailed understanding of the situations in which people develop-the immediate situations as well as the less immediate cultural processes in which children and their partners (and their ancestors) participate." (Rogoff, 2003)

Comparative early childhood education therefore focuses on the cultural nature of development as a way to define people's activities and actions instead of a linear developmental viewpoint.

The mainstream education system in the United States includes some basic concepts and values that are foundational to a viewpoint that produces DAP as described by NAEYC, but these beliefs are rarely felt or seen by those in a position of power due to their language, financial position, or native status. In fact research has indicated that a fundamental obstacle to exploring what people believe is that they are often unaware of their own beliefs and sometimes

have insufficient language to describe and label their beliefs (Ernest, 2001). Cultural values such as the importance of play to help children construct knowledge, sequential stages of development, and focusing activities based on children's interests are just a few of the beliefs that abound in the United States but are rarely discussed as an inherent belief system by early childhood practitioners (Edwards, 2003). In comparative early childhood education the commonplace definitions of growth, development, and learning that form the lens for a nation's method for assessing and measuring children's progress are challenged due to their inherent monoculture specificity (Genishi & Goodwin, 2008). Countries from around the world will therefore have differing folk beliefs that inform their justification for early childhood education practices that contrast with those we are familiar with in the United States.

Just as in many other professions there are potentially multiple knowledges that can be used in the early childhood arena. Each of these knowledges appears natural and right to the teachers who use it and each has its source in particular historical and cultural contexts (Anderson-Levitt, 2002). Numerous bodies of knowledge are required for teaching and the comparative early childhood education lens rejects the assumption that all teachers across countries and cultures share the same values and know-how. Each culture's requirement for the knowledges desired of its educators will vary, and many will include a 'hidden curriculum' unnoticed by the mainstream populace.(Anderson-Levitt, 2002).These knowledges form implicit practices that are based on cultural beliefs that are widely shared by practitioners and passed down from generation to generation of teachers (Hayashi, Karasawa, & Tobin, 2009) Because of the 'hidden' nature of some of these forms of knowledge and their unique form in each country the applicability of a 'one size fits all' curriculum for children is consequently brought into question.

When interpreting an educational policy such as DAP each individual uses their own individualized and culturally based lens to determine their understanding. These ethnocentric definitions of childhood range from an individual's determination on 'universal' rights of children to the role that a child's home, school, and city should play in their development (Holloway & Valentine, 2000). Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti developed the term 'funds of knowledge' as a way to describe the life experiences that have given individuals unique strengths and resources that they use in interpreting the world around them (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). The field of comparative early childhood education recognizes that norms regarding what behaviors are considered appropriate vary across cultures and are typically judged using the mainstream lens for that culture (Klinger et al., 2005). Just as the inherent folk beliefs and traditions of the overall teaching environment can affect the interpretation of education practices, so too can each individual's cultural lens.

Connections between the early childhood education systems in a country and what is happening in the larger society are also a large focus of comparative education (Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009). As the authors explain in the seminal comparative early childhood education works *Preschool in Three Cultures* and *Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited,* each nation expects its preschools to change in order to produce children with the kinds of skills and attributes it believes are needed for success in a rapidly changing society (Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009). By utilizing videotape technology of preschool classrooms in three countries and international viewing sessions of the films Tobin and his fellow researchers sought to explore the connections between early childhood education and society in a way that illustrates how widespread communal beliefs can impede generalizations regarding developmentally

appropriate practice. This foundational belief in the function of society on education supports the use of a comparative lens in looking at early childhood education around the globe.

As displayed above without the field of comparative early childhood education we as educators will remain 'imprisoned' by our own national habits and unable to handle alternatives to policy and practices that are unfamiliar to us:

> "Without comparison we simply refashion the world to fit our individual, collective or political interests and remain imprisoned by local or national habits that are too deeply ingrained to allow us to countenance alternatives." (Alexander, 2000)

It is by using a comparative early childhood education lens that the notion of DAP is supported, challenged, broadened, and informed in classrooms around the world.

PRACTICES AROUND THE WORLD

The rest of this paper will utilize the following format to compare ideal practices in other cultures with those considered developmentally appropriate by NAEYC. Five particular DAP principles will be discussed, with a concrete example of a 'similar in cultural ideal' principle from another country used to broaden the interpretation of this principle. Using a comparative early childhood education lens I will then discuss how this cultural ideal broadens, informs, or challenges the NAEYC DAP principle in order to make space for and bring legitimacy to these other countries' practices.

Example #1: Relationships and development

In the books *Preschool in Three Cultures* and *Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited* the authors used an innovative technological approach to document and compare the preschool practices in China, Japan, and the United States. After being released in 1991 the original *Preschool in Three Cultures* three part technique of filming a preschool classroom's activities in one country, receiving feedback from educators in that country, and then screening this film with educators in other countries to identify their conclusions became the standard for research in comparative early childhood education practices. The videos of educative practice in China included an activity called the 'Story Telling King' that highlighted criticism of preschool students as a means towards cultivating learning and promoting social values (Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009).

In the 'Story Telling King' activity a child from the Chinese preschool class is chosen by the teacher to stand in front of their peers and recite a story of their own creation. After reciting their story the teacher then asks students to give their opinion of the student's story or to ask

questions of the storyteller. Many of the students point out irregularities in the speakers story (i.e., that the preschooler did not follow the story exactly as written), and at the end of this discussion time the students vote on whether or not a student can be the 'Story Telling King' (Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009). After one particular child is voted the 'Story Telling King' by a vote of 18 to 6 the teacher and students finish this activity with the following:

> "Wang Laoshi (Teacher): Good. He can be Story Telling King today. But a number of little friends did not raise their hands for him. Let's hear what they have to say, okay?
>
> One Boy: In his sentences, some words were clear and some were not clear.
>
> Another Boy: I have trouble hearing him.
>
> Wang Laoshi: Ziyu can be King of Story Tellers. (Turning to Ziyu) But next time when you tell another story, you need to be louder and clearer." (Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009)

This process of reciprocal critique and discussion in groups in called *qiecuo* (learning from each other by exchanging ideas) in China and is considered a culturally implicit practice of Chinese pedagogy (Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009). Straightforward criticism is a common feature in China and an activity such as the 'Story Telling King' is seen as an exemplary method to prepare children for the process of self-perfection that is required by their society (Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009).

The above example is in direct opposition with NAEYC's DAP principle number seven which focuses on giving children opportunities for positive relationships with their peers (Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8, 2009). In fact when screening this portion of the video to audiences in Japan and the United States, educators in these two countries focused on this encouragement of criticism as

their largest discussion point (Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009). The fostering of high self-esteem is considered a vital part of developmentally appropriate practice by NAEYC and the activity of the 'Story Telling King' is generally not considered appropriate because of its critique of a peer's storytelling (Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009). This criticism is regarded as a legitimate and even ideal practice in China however and therefore offers a challenge to the DAP guideline established by NAEYC. In order to recognize the validity of this perspective, a rewritten guideline as viewed through a comparative education lens would be the following:

> **7. Children develop best when they have secure, consistent relationships with responsive adults and peers that reflect the relational dynamics encouraged in their country or culture.**

Example #2: Domains of development

By and large the role given to pre-schooling in Morocco and Algeria is to instill moral, social, and family values, habits, and knowledge via traditional learning methods (Bouzoubaa & Benghabrit-Remaoun, 2004). Although the form of these preschools ranges from Koranic structures to public and private kindergartens and nursery schools, in Morocco the Koranic *kuttabs* that fall under the control of the Ministry of National Education and Youth care for the greatest number of preschool children (Bouzoubaa & Benghabrit-Remaoun, 2004). Principles of faith and morals are considered a foundational domain in the development of children and their futures by both educators and families. This domain is emphasized more than any other by these countries, with the Koran serving as the basis for the rudiments of reading and writing instruction (Bouzoubaa & Benghabrit-Remaoun, 2004).

In India recognizing and supporting religious diversity also plays a large role in the moral development of preschoolers. Although India is considered a secular country, in this country's context secular is understood as all religions being equally recognized and celebrated, and not the kind of separation between church and state as is the case in the United States (Gupta, 2006). Children participate and recognize the importance of the spiritual domain of development everyday, as described by an Indian preschool teacher below:

> "I've got a Muslim girl and whenever there is *Id* (the Muslim holiday celebrated nation-wide) this Muslim girl will get *Sevain* (a sweet Vermicelli pudding) from home, and she'll talk about her festival…Then for *Gurpurah* (the Sikh festival) we have a special assembly where we do the *Guru Granth Sahib ki pooja* (a Sikh prayer ceremony) and whatever they do, and then parents get *Kara Prashad* (blessed food) from home. Then *Janashtami* and *Diwali* and *Ramayan* (three major Hindu holidays)- all that we have. Then we have Christmas celebrations…for every festival there is a lot of festivity." (Gupta, 2006)

Teaching students to acknowledge and celebrate all religious holidays is an important goal for the teachers and families of preschoolers in India and is therefore held in the same regard as other developmental domains (Gupta, 2006).

Within NAEYC's DAP guideline number one there is no mention of a moral developmental domain. These guidelines emphasize the interactions between the physical, social and emotional, and cognitive arenas but make no specific mention of the role of faith or moral instruction. Influenced by both the Western education system and our country's historic separation of church and state moral instruction is seen to reside outside of the realm of public educators. Influenced by parents who deem religion to be their domain, the ability for a

preschool teacher to celebrate every religious holiday of all of their students is unheard of in our country. This practice is in direct opposition to the ideal early childhood education practices of Morocco, Algeria, and India as seen above and for that reason can be used to broaden the NAEYC definition of appropriate practice. An alternate ideal that would include this viewpoint and by extension the cultures that consider moral education of paramount importance follows:

> **1. All the domains of development and learning-which can include physical, social and emotional, cognitive, and moral- are interrelated and exert important influence based on the culture they are located in. Children's development and learning in one domain influence and are influenced by what takes place in other domains.**

Example #3: Sequence of development

Kathryn Anderson-Levitt used a technique similar to the videotaping employed in *Preschool in Three Cultures* to observe education classes in France in *Teaching Cultures*. When presenting her videotapes to audiences in America one of the most unique sequences involved the process of writing in a first grade French classroom. In this class all writing that the teacher presented on the main chalkboard and the student's performed on their own smaller, personal chalkboards was in cursive. Not only did teachers in France expect first graders to read and write in cursive; they expected their students to write much smaller than U.S. first graders (Anderson-Levitt, 2002). At the same time, however, the learning or writing of upper-case letters was not seen as an expectation for children until the second grade, as these capital letters were seen as "too difficult" for the children's current developmental stage (Anderson-Levitt, 2002).

Many U.S. observers of this French videotape were shocked at this particular sequence as it clashed with their notions of what children are able to perform at this age. Teachers in the United States not only assumed that cursive would be difficult for 6 year olds, but also felt it was asking a great deal of first graders to learn cursive and manuscript at the same time (Anderson-Levitt, 2002). This French educational norm goes against what is typically deemed as NAEYC developmentally appropriate sequences of learning for how children gain specific skills, including writing and reading. Although not specifically addressed in guideline number two, NAEYC does emphasize that educators should be familiar with 'known learning sequences' in order to inform curriculum development and teaching practice (Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8, 2009). In the United States this sequence for writing typically move from a knowledge of printing to cursive, with capital letters incorporated at an early age (see the Texas Education Agencies Prekindergarten Guidelines for specific examples of DAP writing/reading learning sequences). Developmental sequences are not rigid and unbending across cultures and borders as observed through a comparative education lens and a more valid guideline that would include this cultural ideal follows.

2. Children's learning and development many times follows well documented sequences. However not all later abilities, skills, and knowledge are sequentially built from those already acquired, as initial skills learned are based on societal norms.

Example #4: Scaffolding

The practice of scaffolding is considered a central practice in promoting children's understanding and mastery of new and progressively more advanced challenges (Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8, 2009). Based on a case study of an early childhood center in Japan scaffolding can be engaged in by many different parties and sometimes involves a sort of restrained non-action. This case study comes from the original *Preschool in Three Cultures* study that videotaped early childhood centers in China, Japan, and the United States. In the Japanese video a scene involving a fight between four girls over a teddy bear is a focal point of the observation. During free play Nao, Seiko, and Reiko fight over a teddy bear, eventually ending up falling to the floor in a pile of pushing and pulling bodies (Hayashi, Karasawa, & Tobin, 2009). The classroom teacher, Morita-sensei, verbally reprimands the girl with short one-word phrases but does not come over to intervene. Eventually Seiko emerges with the bear and she and other peers admonish the younger Nao that her actions of grabbing the bear out of turn are not allowed in the classroom (Hayashi, Karasawa, & Tobin, 2009). In the end Nao is actually comforted by her former antagonists and walks away arm in arm good naturedly with Seiko.

The interaction above demonstrates the standard Japanese version of scaffolding found in many preschool classrooms. Instead of morita-sensei intervening in a supportive and direct manner she engages in the children's dispute using the traditional techniques of *mimamoru* (watching and waiting) and *machi no hoiku* (supporting child development through waiting) (Hayashi, Karasawa, & Tobin, 2009). Not intervening is not considered the absence of acting, but instead action that requires restraint and judgment (Hayashi, Karasawa, & Tobin, 2009). This diverges from a DAP viewpoint that focuses on a teacher's involved and effective scaffolding techniques to create a rich environment to activate student motivation through

significant personal support and assistance (Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8, 2009). Instead, as the authors explain, in Japan:

> "The teacher's hesitancy to intervene in the children's disputes reflects a cultural pedagogical belief that lessons in emotional development and social skills are better learned from interacting with peers than from didactic instruction or from adult-child dyadic interactions." (Hayashi, Karasawa, & Tobin, 2009)

With this pedagogy of restraint directly challenging the DAP ideal of scaffolding changes to this NAEYC guideline would aid in creating a standard more appropriate for a wider group of children. To incorporate these differing viewpoints an alternate guideline eleven is listed below.

> **11. Development and learning advance when children are challenged by both peers and adults to achieve at a level just beyond their current mastery through both active and reserved methods of scaffolding, and also when they have many opportunities to practice newly acquired skills.**

Example #5: Play

Within South India the practice of meditation is typical not just for adults but also for young children. At one particular early childhood center in this area the process of teacher-led meditation is called *silent sitting* (Adair & Bhaskaran, 2010). Occurring just after outside playtime and before lunch the teacher first leads children in English with sitting in a specific position on the floor, breathing deeply, and finally in a quiet personal time to think or a visualization session (Adair & Bhaskaran, 2010). This *silent sitting* is engaged in as an individual process for each student that can help in increasing a child's attention span, English

language skills, and physical well-being. Academic benefits are also seen as *silent sitting* assists students with remaining focused on an academic activity even when it is challenging (Adair & Bhaskaran, 2010). *Silent sitting* and meditation are experienced throughout the South Indian culture and are found in many domains of a child's life.

Staying inside Asia, the country of Korea's practices regarding play has been the subject of much recent research. Over the past few decades a shift has occurred in Korean society that has directly affected the culture's outlook on play. The rapid spread of modernization and affluence has changed what had been an essentially community-centered, highly collectivist Korean society to an increasingly individualistic one (Lee & McMullen, 2006). This change has influenced the early childhood world with educators and parents alike shifting their attention to preparing children to compete internationally and live in a global society by focusing on their role as future human capital (Lee & McMullen, 2006). This shift has directly affected the role of play in early childhood education, as displayed when comparing highly utilized textbooks from the years 1993 and 2003.

When the content of the 1993 textbook was analyzed play was found as being emphasized as an effective teaching and learning tool and as one of the critical influences on young children's social development (Lee & McMullen, 2006). In fact, as a percentage total, the theme of play occupied 6.27% of the entire content of the text (Lee & McMullen, 2006). Contrast this with a Korean early childhood textbook circa 2003, when play is not specifically listed as a theme or topic in any part of the book. Instead, the focus has shifted to multicultural education and preparing children to understand a great variety of information in order to be competent in a global society (Lee & McMullen, 2006). A child-centered pedagogical

philosophy that includes a focus on play is often in conflict with the ideals of parents and the larger Korean society about how to best educate children (McMullen et al., 2005).

Both of these examples display attitudes towards play and its supposed benefits that differ with NAEYC's DAP guidelines. The practice of *silent sitting* in South India is seen as a model way for children to learn self-regulation skills such as dealing with adversity, fostering concentration, and focused listening (Adair & Bhaskaran, 2010). This experience is one encountered by children in many other areas of their life and therefore is seen as just as legitimate as play in promoting skills such as language, cognition, and social competence. As a result the emphasis on play and its benefits as seen in NAEYC's 2009 DAP guidelines can be broadened to include other culture's activities that look quite different from our Western notions of 'play' but nevertheless confer the same 'appropriate' benefits.

When this example is put side to side with that from Korea a different interpretation of the role of play in early childhood education is revealed. Play is simply not seen as a vital necessity to developing the competencies considered most important by this society. In fact due to the controversy surrounding DAP between educators, parents, and the larger society in Korea other researchers have previously questioned the ability of DAP or any single philosophy to be able to be applied universally to meet the needs of all children and families within a given society, let alone across multiple cultures and contexts (McMullen et al., 2005). The capacity to compete internationally is seen as fundamental in education within Korea. Based on both of these examples a more extensive and culturally relevant DAP guideline number ten is listed below.

10. Play is one important cultural vehicle for developing self-regulation as well as for promoting language, cognition, and social competence. The role that play takes

in a child's life is partially determined by what the larger society considers appropriate competencies for children to learn.

CONCLUSION

The overall goal of this work was to present examples from other countries and cultures of their ideas of developmentally appropriate practice and compare these to NAEYC's 2009 DAP guidelines in order to see in what ways alternate ideals could support, inform, broaden, or challenge these well-known guidelines. By employing a comparative early childhood education framework these different practices were not displayed to simply criticize NAEYC DAP but to demonstrate that critique can be used to make space for the legitimacy of other ideas on best practices for young children. NAEYC's guidelines on developmentally appropriate practices do reflect the mainstream beliefs of early childhood educators in the United States, and this "green Bible's" guidelines do strive to incorporate children from all walks of life. But as these examples show, a greater application of the comparative early childhood framework is needed to recognize and open our own practices to discussion on what is considered appropriate. We as educators will benefit from this conversation, but more importantly so will our students whose culture and background currently cannot fit into NAEYC's developmentally appropriate guidelines.

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